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10 September 1985

OMAN-US RELATIONS: Problems and Opportunities

Summary

Omani Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Yusuf bin Alawi will be looking for clear signals that the US is ready to take a new approach in its relations with Oman during his visit to Washington in late September. Specifically, he will be seeking the political dialogue between senior US and Omani policymakers he believes has been lacking since the conclusion of the 1980 agreement on US access to Omani facilities. Alawi also will be looking for signs that the US appreciates Muscat's concerns about its sovereignty and that Washington is aware of the significance of changes in Oman's security situation that have occurred during the last five years. Alawi's visit provides opportunities to repair some of the damage to relations caused by the misunderstandings and perceived slights that surrounded the May discussions of bilateral relations and changes to the 1980 accord. Even if Alawi's concerns are assuaged during his upcoming visit, however, the Omanis will expect more trips to Muscat by senior US officials.

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Alawi's irritation with Washington and the strains in military cooperation cast doubt on the durability of the US-Omani security partnership. Unless the current state of affairs is changed, we have no reason to doubt Sultan Qaboos's press statements that the access agreement will not be extended when it

This memorandum was prepared by William Jordan, Office of Analysis for Near East and South Asia of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, and by [] Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis of the Directorate of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency. Comments are welcome and may be addressed to Chief, Persian Gulf Division, Central Intelligence Agency, [] or to Director, Office of Analysis for Near East and South Asia, Department of State, 632-8397.

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expires in 1990. Even though Alawi has supported US-Omani cooperation, he has dominated Muscat's contacts with the US, and Washington's ability to engage Oman in a policy dialogue is too dependent on Alawi's political clout and his access to Qaboos. [REDACTED]

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The Problem

Even sympathetic Omani officials have come to regard the US as a less than serious partner in a relationship that carries, in the Omani view, considerable risks. Among those holding this view is Yusuf bin Alawi, the Omani official who exercises the most influence on Sultan Qaboos concerning foreign affairs. His frustration with Washington, [REDACTED] appears to have precipitated not only the cancellation of the political half of the May talks, but also contributed to Oman's tough position on amending the 1980 agreement. Washington's subsequent difficulty in securing acceptable negotiated changes and the recent contretemps over the routine for signing an acceptable text indicate that Alawi remains piqued. [REDACTED]

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Alawi's irritation with the US and the contentious nature of the security relationship is a dramatic sign of the tenuousness of any long-term US-Omani security partnership. This situation will prevail so long as the US has only one or two proponents of close ties in senior Omani circles. Because of the UK's historic ties with Oman, the anglophilia of Sultan Qaboos, and the presence of British advisers at most levels of the Omani military and government, the US faces a formidable challenge in fostering viewpoints favorable to the current access arrangements. [REDACTED]

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Omani nationalists like Alawi are resentful of the persistent British presence, and perceive a security relationship with Washington as a means of eliminating Oman's dependence on London. They are at a disadvantage in arguing their case, however, when the dividends from a closer association with the US appear meager. [REDACTED]

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The absence of senior Washington participation in the May bilateral talks, the lack of senior US officials regularly visiting Muscat, the emphasis US officials place on the access agreement, and the lack of a significant military aid relationship reinforce the perception by many Omanis that the relationship is one dimensional. Moreover, regular visits to Muscat by senior British Defense and Foreign Ministry officials, the ease of access enjoyed by Omanis with Thatcher and other cabinet officials, and a thriving British military aid relationship weaken the position of those Omanis who advocate closer ties with Washington. [REDACTED]

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Changing View of Security Needs

The US position is also undermined by Oman's perception that the threats to its security have lessened since 1980. From Muscat's

perspective, the USSR is bogged down in Afghanistan, Marxist South Yemen is normalizing relations with Oman, and Iran is drained by its five-year-old war with Iraq. This changed threat perception has prompted Omani leaders to reassess their regional outlook. The key elements of current Omani policy include:

- A willingness to maintain normal relations with Iran, coupled with a determination to preserve free passage through the Strait of Hormuz;
- An increased desire to rely on its own military capabilities to deal with most threats, including an Iranian attempt to block the Strait of Hormuz;
- Promoting a NATO-like security structure for the GCC that emphasizes the independent development of member state military forces; and
- The prescription of limits and controls over its relationship with the US in order to secure the benefits of US protection and military cooperation while not provoking Iran or infringing on Omani sovereignty. [REDACTED]

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Implications

A continuation of the current pattern of relations augurs for more disruptions of the 1980 agreement similar to those encountered this past May. This will hamper further development of the facilities and the prepositioning of equipment and supplies we would need in the Persian Gulf during a crisis. Under prevailing conditions, Omani officials like Alawi would have little leverage on the Sultan, who has recently stated he has no intention to renew the access accord with the US when it expires in 1990.

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Merely preserving the status quo in US-Omani relations also could motivate the Omanis to vent their frustration by joining with other Gulf states in broadening their relations with Eastern European countries. Oman (which already has diplomatic relations with China and Yugoslavia) could build on recent contacts with Soviet officials at the UN to engage the USSR in a process eventually leading to the establishment of diplomatic relations. [REDACTED]

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Looking beyond the next five years, the earlier we reestablish our credentials as a serious partner with Oman, the greater will be our

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opportunities to take advantage of the inevitable British withdrawal. As long as the Sultan rules, the UK will enjoy a privileged relationship with Muscat. Nevertheless, Omanis are gradually replacing the British and the emerging generation of Omanis is not likely to be as pro-British as their predecessors. [REDACTED]

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The Opportunity

Alawi's attendance at the UN General Assembly session and his subsequent visit to Washington provide the opportunity for talks between Alawi and US counterparts. Alawi will be looking for signals that the US wants to improve the relationship. He is an important advocate of cooperation and likely would use the talks to bolster his position in Omani circles. [REDACTED]

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Muscat probably would react well if US officials discussed Oman's importance to the United States, showed an awareness of the rough spots in the relationship, and expressed a willingness to put them behind us. In our judgment, Alawi would welcome a frank discussion of the limitations on our ability to send senior officials to Muscat. An expression by senior US officials of a desire for high-level contacts whenever possible would help reassure Alawi of our good intentions and sound a positive yet realistic note. [REDACTED]

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Meetings with Vice-President Bush, whom the Omanis regard as a special friend, and similar meetings with Secretaries Shultz and Weinberger would be especially helpful to Alawi. Over the longer term, however, Alawi and others will be looking for more visits by senior civilian US policymakers to Muscat. In this regard, we believe that Omanis would appreciate the presence of a senior civilian US official at Oman's November 18 National Day celebration. [REDACTED]

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